

The Decline of the Pentagon

By JAMES RESTON

It is almost impossible to pick up a copy of The Congressional Record these days without reading some thumping criticism of the power and stewardship of the Pentagon.

For over a generation, the soldier-statesmen of the Eisenhower-Marshall-MacArthur era, backed enthusiastically by Senator Richard Russell of Georgia, Representative Mendel Rivers of South Carolina and other key members of the Armed Services and Appropriations Committees, have held the balance of power over the State Department and the Foreign Relations and Foreign Affairs Committees, but the balance is now changing, and the reasons are fairly clear.

The Changing Generations

The bitter conflict of ideology and national strategic interests between Moscow and Peking has forced the Soviet leaders to temper their cold war propaganda against the West. The triumphant and spectacular American military figures of the last world war have been replaced by a new generation of military technicians whose names and faces are unfamiliar and whose military problems and achieve-

ments have been almost too complicated for popular acclaim.

Besides, not only the Joint Chiefs of Staff but their most powerful backers on Capitol Hill have declined in power. Senator Russell has been grievously ill, and Mendel Rivers has been spectacularly silly and self-indulgent. It is significant that Representative George H. Mahon of Texas, chairman of the powerful House Appropriations Committee, who used to go along, has recently caught the drift and begun to question the omnipotence of the Pentagon and its leaders.

The Changing Mood

The increasingly critical tone in Congress, however, is more than a switch of personal judgment. It is a reflection of changing moods, judgments and priorities in the country.

So long as the physical menace of the Soviet Union seemed to threaten the security of the nation, the Pentagon could get almost any amount of money it liked from the Congress. In fact, it asked for so much that the defense budget itself became almost incomprehensible, not only to the Congress, but

to most of the leaders in the Pentagon itself.

The Congress however, pays attention to the mood of the country, which decides who gets elected, and the mood has changed. The main threat to the security of the union now seems to lie in the conflicts and divisions at home, and these conflicts and visions—which now require vast appropriations—are traceable in part, at least, to popular reaction against Vietnam, and before that, Cuba.

This is unfair to the military in a way. The responsibility for the tragedies of Cuba and Vietnam lie primarily with the civilian leaders of the Government—with Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, and Secretaries Rusk and McNamara, who accepted the doctrine of power, then cut the power in half or even more.

Still, for whatever reason, the dominant influence of the Pentagon and its policies and its budget are now being questioned, and this is clearly overdue. Aside from the question of the Pentagon's judgment, which is suspect, the question of its waste is appalling.

Thus a subcommittee of the two houses of Congress has

now issued a savage report, condemning the "wasteful, inefficient practices" of the Pentagon, and questioning its judgment on useless weapons systems which have cost many billions of dollars.

The Critical Spirit

The critical spirit toward the Pentagon is now being directed not only against its procurement procedures, its cost controls and its strategic judgments, but even against its tactics on the Vietnam battlefield.

This is the way it used to be before the last war, when the military had to go to Capitol Hill in fear and trepidation. Even when the Pentagon was built, Congress had to be convinced before voting the funds that the big five-ringed structure could be turned into a hospital. The reaction against the post-war military domination has clearly not gone back to that point, but the reaction has set in. At least the Pentagon is being questioned severely now, and that is something new in the last few months.